Katherina Olschbaur

PROVOKING RESTLESSNESS

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Interview by **HANNA PALLOT** Photography by **SAM RAMIREZ**

Originally from Austria, painter Katherina Olschbaur is now a well-known figure on the Los Angeles art scene, where she arrived over 7 years ago. Her sensitivity, curiosity and commitment are striking, made of all the experiences from her childhood and studies in Vienna, her time in Dakar, and her encounter with the Los Angeles artistic community. Ahead of presenting her next solo show in Paris at Galerie Perrotin in September, Katherina talks about her work and creative process with honesty, always driven by her emotions, connecting the abstract with the narrative-driven and all the layers that she is composed of. Among other things, we talked about the cultural processes, religious imagery, tensions and bodies that provoke a quiet restlessness in her practice.

You relocated from Vienna to Los Angeles 7 years ago. What sparked your decision for this move?
I lived in Vienna for 17 years. I left my family to become an artist there, so this city is very important to me. To leave Vienna was painful in a way, it meant leaving my community, and a certain comfort, my sources of income. At the same time, I knew I needed to take a risk and be away from the place I had known. I moved to the United States in 2017, one week after the inauguration of Donald Trump as president. It was a crazy time. I first arrived in Oakland, then I moved to Los Angeles two months later. I heard it was an interesting place for artists at that moment. I couldn't drive and I couldn't afford a living place, but I had found a studio which was all I needed! I experienced a lot of generosity there. I didn't know anyone when I arrived, people gave me contacts and possibilities to show my work before I had any gallery representing me. Initially, I thought I would return to Vienna stronger than when I left, but I ended up settling my life here.

How does Austrian cultural history influence your work?
I've always been fascinated by the 1920s and early 1930s. This period was a very open-minded one and it was followed by a complete regression which led to austrofaschism and a national conservative culture. The writers of this time inspire me a lot because they question how these political changes have an impact on intimate relationships. Moreover, Austria is mainly Catholic and the culture is mainly square. The idea of rebellion is very important to me. Rebellion against authority, both in society and in ourselves.

Indeed, your work partly relates to religion, cults, power structures, and so on. How has religion affected your practice?
When I was a child, I was obsessively living in my own fantasy and I was always drawing. It was a way to cope with reality, as well as change and loss. My father is a Protestant pastor and my mother used to play the organ and piano. At a younger age, I didn't understand the church's institution. I was fascinated by the music and the First Testament's stories that I interpreted in my own way. I didn't grow up with so many images around me, so I found them in religion and in the experience of being at church. I'm not sure I liked it, but it was part of my childhood. Then I started to perceive this institution as always using an abuse of power and operating with fear to put people down.
The Catholic church has strong imagery with a lot of aesthetic codes around sweetness and death. When I came to Vienna to study, we went to places like Madrid to see the Prado, Toledo and the big catholic churches. For me, all of that was the entry point into painting. My introduction to contemporary art didn't come through painting at all, it was more with cinema, multimedia, and feminist and Marxist film theory.

How did you experience the encounter between religion and the entry to contemporary art?
It was more of a fight. For a long time, I felt like I was working against myself and I didn't allow myself to really get lost in painting. This is why I needed to leave Vienna; to be left on my own and display myself completely.

What makes up your artistic process and what fuels it now?
The process of drawing is mixing everything I experience in a very intuitive way. People can relate my work to surrealist techniques, but I'm not so interested in surrealism itself. I'm interested in the lack of a better world. Each painting is eventually the result of a negotiation, often a fight, between my multiple personas. These negotiations are visualized on many layers: marks, formulation of figures, bodies, memories, etc. There is no predefined formula, it's a dynamic process, a play between creation and destruction.
Moreover, I've been trying to understand American history and culture as well as staying connected to mine. I have been mostly interested in the role that the persecution of the witches in Europe played in the emergence of capitalism and how the violent enslavement of people of African origin has been making the base of the capitalism that we know today. So, I think the interest in both cultural and personal processes has always been part of the work.

You used the word fight earlier. It's interesting because there are multiple tensions in your work, between figuration and abstraction, shapes and colors. Looking at your paintings, we can perceive at first a colourful image while understanding there is a darker layer underneath. Is painting a way for you to deal with contrasted energies?
Yes, definitely. Painting partly comes from my inner demons, but if I only react to them or to my fears, then it's limited. It's made of both fears and very beautiful moments. Colour also comes from that, but it's something beyond languages that you can't really describe. I'm interested in ambivalence, in those moments when you can't quite qualify if what is happening is joyful or violent. Because life is complex, and I don't like things that are flat. I don't want to be categorized as painting only beautiful or dark things. Sometimes you have to go deeper into something you can barely describe.

How do you confront your imagination and reality?
To be honest, it's very hard for me to differentiate them. Both in my daily life and in my work, it's about simultaneously struggling and provoking. I want to go into all the areas where I don't know exactly what's going on. I want to be drawn into something that I don't understand. It's about dealing with life and provoking restlessness. When you paint and you're really in it, you have all the emotions coming up. You have visions of you crying or being happy. It's somehow a form of madness. [Laughs]

Indeed. [Laughs] If painting is the result of a flow of emotions and experiences, do you still manage to distance yourself? How do you connect all these elements?
There is always one part of me that looks at the painting in a more distant way. Before I came to the States, I decided to go into abstraction. My work used to be very narrative-driven. I thought the narrative was too dominant, so I consciously gave up on it. I went from this phase where there was almost nothing on my canvas anymore to a progressive reintegration of figuration. When I think about how the elements connect, I look at the painting as if it was both abstract and narrative-filled at the same time. Because I paint about relationships and I'm interested in conversations and spaces between layers.

Your work now depicts bodies and figures. How do you look at the body?
Historically, there was a very patriarchal concept that split the mind and the body. The mind was better and masculine, the body was slower, weak and feminine. I've always been fighting against that, of course. Today, we are at a certain transition time between being digital and being physical. Our bodies contain everything – our mind, our memory, our intelligence – but somehow, we partly already left our bodies; technology gives us options and at the same time allows for new forms of policing. I'm fascinated by dance and performance because the body is used as a full way of expression. There is the physicality of the body, but there can also be the evocation of a body that is no longer here, like in the religious imagery.

What is it like to be a female artist speaking about bodies?
I feel there is still so much hate towards women's bodies in our society. Women's bodies are still governed in so many different ways, especially if they are non-white or poor. The body gives us strength and at the same time makes us very vulnerable. I want to honour the female body, but also all kinds of bodies, of all ages. I want to pay respect to bodies that have been used and done so much labour, especially for others.

I have one last question. At the beginning of the interview, you said that as a child, you used to have a fantasy as a refuge. Is this fantasy still there?
The older you get the heavier it becomes, because you see what humans are capable of doing to each other. The world is so unbelievably cruel and brutal that this fantasy is sometimes very hard to keep on. But I think it's still there and it will still exist. Maybe it's a fantasy of peace and fullness. I do believe that art has the power to connect people and to bring the possibility of something else. I don't think I would otherwise continue to do it if I didn't believe that.

Katherina Olschbaur is represented by Galerie Perrotin and Nicodim Gallery

Her upcoming solo exhibition will be on view from August 31th to September 21th at Galerie Perrotin in Paris


世紀敦煌
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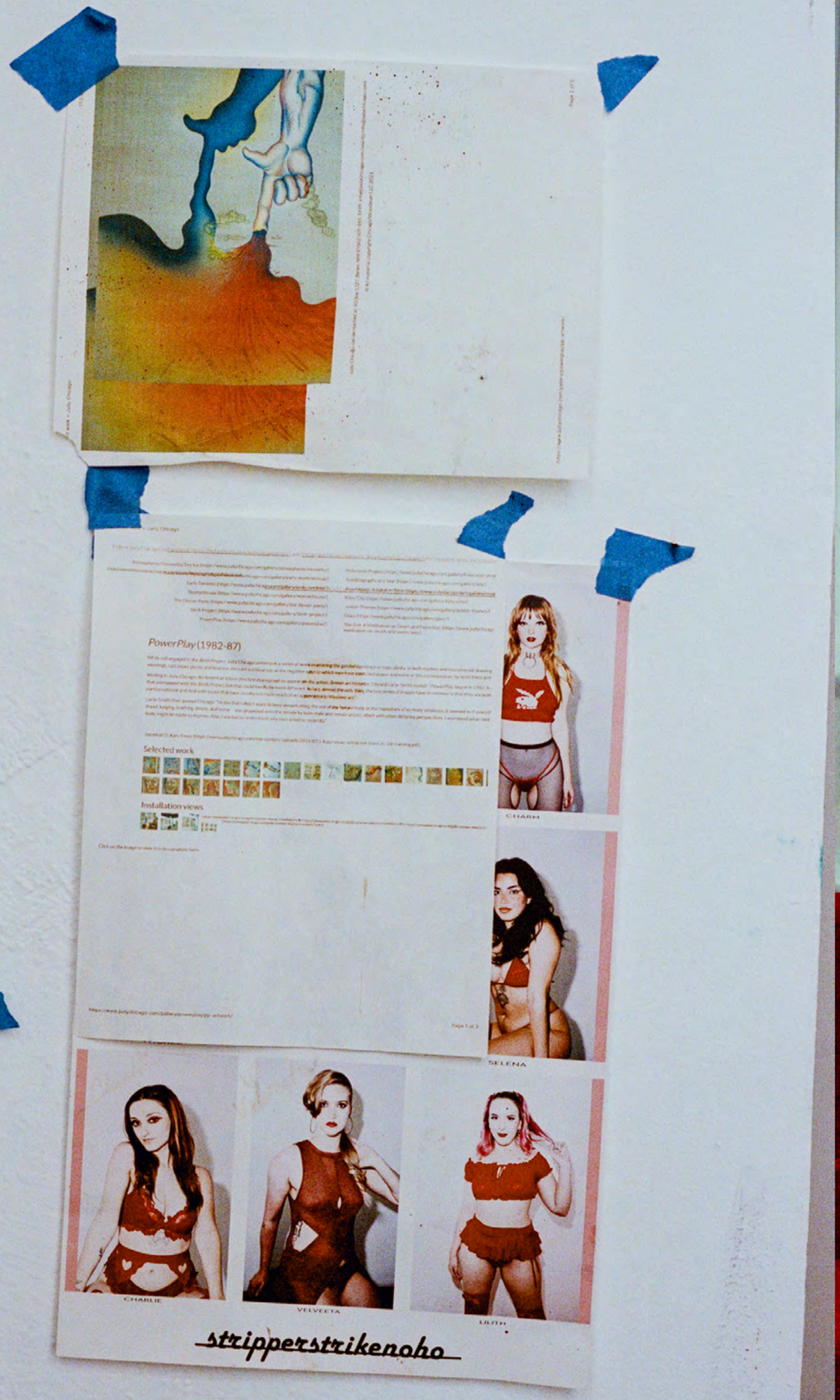
In Dunhuang
Since 1907
百年的
莫高窟
影像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